

'A two-way process': Women offenders, personality, power and partnerships

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Abstract

This research sought to address the following questions:

- How do voluntary sector agencies working with women offenders currently perceive partnership work?
- What is the current and emerging National and Statutory policy with regards to working with women offenders, and how does that impact on the partnerships in Bradford District?

- What barriers are there to successful partnership work?
- What impact does the contracting of services have on partnership activity for women offenders?
- How can partnerships sustain and develop in future to improve outcomes for women offenders?

The approach to this research combined both qualitative and quantitative data.

Findings

- The service women offenders receive are often driven by the personalities behind those delivering the support. Concentrating activity amongst a smaller pool of Offender Managers to assist in 'skilling' them up to work in a gender sensitive way was welcomed by those involved in the research.
- Avenues to share knowledge, ideas and resources are important in developing partnership arrangements that cater for women offenders.
- The current offender management model that allocates resource (in offender manager time) to risk is not suitable for women offenders. The importance of building a relationship with women to improve confidence to access outside resources is undermined by the level of

intervention that can be offered under the current workload measurement tool within the probation service.

- Service User involvement at all levels of organisations is crucial in developing services that are both gender sensitive and meaningful for the women who use it. This includes the probation service.
- The needs of sex workers in particular was an area where there were competing initiatives and targets. Offender Managers had a poor knowledge of the health risk, and risks to personnel safety experienced by them. Often these women were those who were most chaotic, utilising a range of partners to receive interventions, but also a group likely to breach probation orders due to their lifestyles.

Recommendations

- Reducing re-offending rates by women should be included within Crime Disorder Reduction Partnership's performance data. This is because the cost of offending extends to children and families of women. The social impacts extend to families and children.
- The needs of substance using offenders, particularly those of street sex workers, are currently not being met by the offender management model. Training for all offender managers in Drug Rehabilitation Requirement units should encompass an element of work specifically focussing on street sex workers.
- All offender managers should receive dedicated training on how to implement the Offender Management Guide for Working with Women Offenders (2008).
- A new gender sensitive model for women offenders should be developed to take into account the time needed for offender managers to help build meaningful professional

relationships with women. This should take into account the whole life cost of women's offending, to allow for adequate resource time to be allocated. This would mean that women classified as low risk but with complex needs, are afforded time. In addition, this model should take women's needs as a whole, blurring the Reducing Reoffending Action Plan pathways currently given to offenders. This would allow offender managers to deliver meaningful interventions that look at women's offending holistically.

- Probation should seek to develop its own women's service user groups able to feedback directly to the District Management Group and the Senior Management Group to inform probation practice and contracting for women's services.
- A Woman's Champion that links to the Local Strategic Partnership would assist in bringing a sharper focus to the needs of vulnerable women in Bradford District and to drive the delivery of The Gender Equality Duty.